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Love’s Fragility

Throughout Hemingway’s novel, there are many examples of male and female relationships doomed to failure. It is difficult to find any loving relationship that doesn’t end in heartbreak or some other tragic circumstance. Being that this is certainly not accidental, it beckons the question, Why? Hemingway utilizes failed romantic relationships to illustrate the fragility of love (in respect to the condition of those infatuated and in respect to love itself) as well as to provide a foil for male-female and male-male relationships. The instability of those involved in a loving relationship is exemplified in the story of “Indian Camp”.

In “Indian Camp”, Nick’s father has difficulty with delivering an infant during a breach birth. However, he is eventually successful and delivers the baby with no issues. On completing the birth, Nick’s father attempts to show the new father his own newborn child, only to discover, in front of Nick, that the man had slit his own throat (Hemingway 18). While we, as the reader, cannot necessarily be sure of the specifics of the particular love between the Indian man and woman, it can be assumed that he was the father (considering he was referred to as such on Page 16) and that the couple was heavily involved with each other (evidenced by the man’s very presence to begin with). Why the man would kill himself during his child’s birth is a question of love’s inability to cope with potentially tragic circumstance. Already suffering from an apparent axe wound, the Indian husband is restricted to his upper bunk and smoking a pipe during the time that Nick’s father is delivering the baby (Page 16). This physical ailment could have perhaps contributed to the man’s decision to end his own life during the more intense periods of his wife’s screaming in his new kin’s birth, but it is ultimately love that brandished the blade. Unable to handle his wife’s screaming and potential demise, the husband slits his own throat. The fact that this action takes place before the child is even born, the idea that this man ends his life at the mere thought of losing his wife, suggests love’s power to immerse a man in fragility and instability. While it may be possible the man committed suicide to avoid the responsibility of a child, it is very unlikely because had that been the case, the man had the option to leave town, or at the very least, not witness his child’s birth from the top bunk so that he might avoid such emotional turmoil. His presence at his child’s birth indicates some sort of intention for involvement in the newborn’s future. It may also be said that the man committed suicide so as not to burden his family with his injured foot. Such an action would be indicative of love as well, because in that case he would have intended to make his wife’s life easier so that she would not be forced into having to care for both himself and the child. Either way, this man ends his life due to his fragile condition brought on by loving his wife.

Further fragile condition evident in this book is the condition of love itself. It would seem that often characters’ romantic relationships are at the very least lacking substance if not totally characterized by superficiality. A quintessential example of such is the relationship between Nick and Marjorie. Hemingway depicts the two’s relationship as formerly having been “fun”, only to end due to Nick’s loss of passion. It is clear that Marjorie still harbors serious feelings for the protagonist as evidenced by her present “love to fish with Nick” (Page 32 Hemingway). However, it is also clear that although Nick use to feel the same way for Marjorie, he has since lost that spark. Marjorie asks, “Isn’t love any fun?” to which our main character replies with a cold “No.” (Page 34 Hemingway). What Hemingway is getting at with the story of these two characters is love’s ability to seemingly vanish. Whereas both Nick and Marjorie once were “having fun”, Nick now no longer feels anything of substance for Marjorie while Marjorie is unfortunate enough to still love Nick. What is inevitably heartbreak for Marjorie is instead clarification for Nick, as evidenced by the manner in which he lies and thinks on Marge’s departure. It must be said that he clearly experiences some emotional disorientation with his exclamation towards Bill to leave, but the crushing weight of heartbreak is nowhere to be found considering his put-together outwards apperance. Love’s disappearance in “The End of Something” characterizes love itself as a flighty emotion, capable of rapid departure without precursor.

While the fragility of love is no doubt a common theme, it must be acknowledged that the primary reason for doomed relationships throughout *In Our Time* is in order to provide a standard for comparison in regards to male-female and male-male relationships. The most notable difference in these relationships is the use of communication, or rather, the lack thereof. In emotional conversations between men throughout the novel, it would seem that the male characters are able to express themselves more freely in their own time. In contrast, in relationships between men and women, it would seem that men are often forced into expressing their feelings, and if not forced to express said emotion, they will not do so at all. For instance, in “Indian Camp”, following the husband’s suicide, Nick’s father has relative little difficulty in admitting to Nick that he should not have brought him along in the first place. In stark opposition lies “The End of Something”, in which Marjorie senses a serious disturbance between herself and Nick. Marjorie then has to ask Nick multiple times to express himself before he feels comfortable to do so, and even when he does, it is a short and terse “No” that puts an end to the conversation rather than provide any sort of substantial rationale behind his loss of passion. That is not to say that the doctor’s conversation in “Indian Camp” with Nick was elaborate and wordy. Rather, it was the very opposite. The difference lies in that Nick’s conversation with his father was natural in its terseness whereas Nick’s conversation with Marjorie was uncomfortably short, as if more needed to be said but neither character was willing to do so. Such is supported by the very fact that Nick did not want to talk to Bill about the break-up, because had Nick properly expressed himself at the time with Marjorie, he would feel relaxed doing the same with Bill (Page 35 Hemingway). However, such is not the case, and Nick instead resorts to telling Bill to “Go away for awhile!” (Page 35 Hemingway). The type of dialogue in these two situations seem to point towards the fact that genders are unable to be fully comfortable with each other in expressing their emotion. This heavy implication is the most prominent reason for the overall failure of romantic relationships throughout the novel.

The lack of successful romantic relationships in this novel is significant, especially considering the amount of sexual relationships that exist throughout. Nick and Marjorie, the American couple in “Cat in the Rain”, Mr. and Mrs. Elliot, and Nick’s father and mother all have seemingly failed relationships characterized by lying, lack of expression, and what would seem to be general unhappiness. Drawing from the stylistic implication between dialogues of men and men as opposed to men and women, these relationships are doomed to fail due to the inability of each gender to properly express himself/herself to the opposite sex. It is through these relationships and their fallacies that Hemingway is able to construct a comprehensive view of gender relations in *In Our Time* as well as depict the fragility in and of love itself as well as its participants.